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ABSTRACT

This report describes an approach to third-year college-level French literature instruction that used a more informal approach to student writing than that traditionally used in such a course. The approach evolved from a comparison of students' formal writing skills with the skills defined in the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages' (ACTFL) proficiency guidelines, and discovery of discrepancies between the two. The teacher began with classroom exercises to build peer relationships and share student attitudes and concerns about foreign language literature study. Subsequently, the class read short stories, poems, and one-act plays, and each term read one longer classical work. In class, students analyzed the actions within each work and wrote brief journal statements of their perceptions of the works. As the quarters progressed, the assigned journal and free-writing tasks encouraged movement up the proficiency scale. Students shared their writing with each other and organized and reviewed their own journals at the end of the term. It was found that student response to the approach was positive, writing became more confident, and fluency and accuracy increased over that of students in previous years. Some practical guidance concerning journal management is offered. (MSE)

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Integrating "Writing to Learn" and Foreign Language Proficiency Concepts

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Integrating "Writing to Learn" and Foreign Language Proficiency Concepts

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The challenge of learning a second language increases when students first explore authentic literary texts. Over the many years that I have taught third-year French literature, I have tried many teaching approaches aimed at increasing student understanding of the literature as well as building targeted language skills. During the 1989-1990 academic year, I participated in several Writing Across the Curriculum workshops, as well as training to become a foreign language Oral Proficiency Interviewer. As a result of this experience, I completely restructured my third-year literature course. In my opinion, these changes produced encouraging results.

Traditionally, the three-quarter Survey of French Literature series introduces students to a portion of the established canon of French literary works. I achieve better success working from shorter complete works, such as short stories, poems, and one-act plays, although I always include one well-known longer work each term—usually Voltaire's *Candide*, the medieval epic *The Song of Roland*, and Moliere's *The Would-be Gentleman*.

Previously, I encouraged development of writing skills in French by assigning short essays, reports, and *explications de texte*. Although I carefully monitored these writing assignments through a series of rough drafts, the gap between students' abilities to express themselves and their desire to share their insights often created frustration. In addition, the process took a great deal of my time.

Students who enroll in this Survey series have had at least two years of college-level French or its equivalent elsewhere. Nevertheless, classes always demonstrate a wide diversity of language skills. During the 1989-1990 series I used the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines as a means of determining students' French language skills.[1] Testing revealed that the majority of students enrolled possessed Intermediate Level speaking and writing skills, while a significant minority had Advanced Level skills in those areas. Extremes ranged from a few students still performing on the Novice Level to one Superior Level native speaker of French. Fortunately, the students were able could to read French more skillfully than they

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could speak or write it: reading skills clustered on the Intermediate-High to Advanced Level.

The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines describe for indications of Superior Level skills the ability to persuade, to make inferences, and to understand and use irony, satire, and humor in the target language. Such considerations traditionally constitute a major part of literary study. Although some undergraduate students do acquire such skills, the majority do not. I therefore sought to develop a reasonable approach that would help students read the traditional canon of French literature and write about that experience according to their various levels of proficiency.

According to the ACTFL Guidelines, students reading on the Intermediate Level are able to follow the basic facts of a narration, but they will miss much detail and description. Those writing on the Intermediate Level are able to create mainly sentence-level discourse in present time. They have a good control of very basic language constructions, but writing errors become very frequent when Intermediates venture beyond the simplest structures and vocabulary.

Students reading at the Advanced Level can grasp most aspects of narration and description. In writing, they can create paragraph-length discourse, such as resumes; they can paraphrase and simply explain their point of view. They can narrate and describe in present, past, and future time. They cannot be expected to perform Superior Level writing tasks, such as defending a hypothesis, supporting an opinion, or analyzing a text for style and content, with consistency and control.

A comparison of the above guidelines with the testing results I obtained suggested that an informal writing approach would be more adaptable to these students' abilities than the more formal one traditionally used. Fired up with enthusiasm and insights acquired during a Writing Across the Curriculum Workshop for Weber State faculty conducted in September 1989 by Toby Fulwiler of the University of Vermont, I decided to try a free-writing, peer-response group, journal-keeping approach throughout the 1989-1990 Survey series.

Use of Writing to Learn Techniques

Basically, the learning model Toby Fulwiler demonstrated empowers the learner to acquire knowledge through active participation in writing, reading, speaking and listening processes. It recommends a "real world" approach appealing to the learner's own perceptions and experiences.

Fulwiler encourages personal and informal writing for a variety of purposes: providing focus at the beginning of a class, processing learning during the class period and throughout the entire course, providing opportunity for self-expression, reflecting, interacting with the instructor and peers, clarifying concepts, etc. He recommends frequently processing such

writing through peer response groups to help writers refine and organize their concepts.

Fulwiler's basic technique could be reduced to a formula. First the teacher opens class with a short (five to ten minute) free-writing session involving quiet, private, individual writing. At the beginning of a course, such writing can deal with students' attitudes toward course material or address their fears. This initial writing also helps the instructor identify each student's level of writing proficiency. Subsequently, such writing can explore a concept, structure out the basic plot of literary works, provide definitions, etc. Next, students spend ten to fifteen minutes sharing their writing in peer groups of three to four persons. One person acts as a recorder who collects the group's responses in order to report them to the entire class. During a third phase, group reports are listed on an overhead or on the chalkboard. Students jot down concepts their own groups did not discuss. To conclude the process there is a general discussion of collected input, followed by a five minute in-class free-write during which students explore their feelings about the process, or comment on new insights they have gained. If a journal approach is used, students include this in-class writing in it along with additional free response entries they may write outside of class.[2]

The trepidation with which I began this new approach soon changed to delight as I saw how favorably students reacted to it. During an initial trust-building phase, I asked students to interview each other in French and then to list in their journals their classmates names, along with several details about each classmate, such as favorite activities and length of study at Weber State. Next, I asked students to write for ten to twelve minutes about their reaction to the experience of studying literature in general and French literature in particular. In the following peer group phase, students read their thoughts to each other. During the reporting phase, I listed their reactions. This resulted in two lists: one related fond memories of past literary enjoyment, the other revealed hesitations at the idea of reading classic works in a second language. I then sought to gain students' trust by telling them that they would control the pace of the course through their free-writing in class, and that writing assignments would depend upon emerging proficiency levels. I also explained that since the majority of the students in the group had Intermediate Level skills, the writing tasks based on the course readings would be at the Intermediate Level of difficulty. Later, they could expect to move toward a more interpretative level of writing. I explained that I would devise different writing tasks appropriate for the two major proficiency levels represented in the class.[3] During the term the level of difficulty for both groups would gradually move up the proficiency scale in order to encourage continued progress. Students seemed appreciative of this approach which took into account their individual levels of preparation, but which also en-

couraged further growth.

The true test began when the class read its first authentic, unsimplified literary work in French. Since the Intermediate Level students would be capable of grasping some of the basic facts of their reading, I began class by having students spend ten minutes listing the five to seven most important steps in the action of the work and an additional ten minutes in peer groups creating more complete and accurate lists. Then each group reported its collective list from which we made a master list of the action. Students inserted individual, peer group, and master lists in their journals, which helped them to perceive writing as a process. We continued this activity throughout the year. Some Advanced Level students found it simplistic, but accepted it when they understood the necessity of having the action of a literary work clearly in mind before moving to any level of interpretation.

Moving to an interpretive level challenged me to devise a variety of writing activities appropriate for the two different levels. Since Intermediate Level students can write short messages, notes, or letters of a practical, concrete nature, I often followed our listing activity by having them pretend to be a character in their reading who was writing a short note to another character. Simultaneously, Advanced Level students were asked to write a paragraph explaining simply their point of view pertaining to an aspect of the reading, or to write a short letter describing a character to a friend. The writing of both groups was then processed through response groups, in which students helped each other process their writing for content, function, and accuracy.[4] Students then wrote a revised draft in their journals; I often spent a few minutes at the beginning of the next class having students share their writing with the entire group.

As each quarter progressed, I devised writing tasks that encouraged movement up the proficiency scale. Since Advanced Level writers can narrate and describe in present, past and future time frames, I challenged all the students to list the action of their readings in the past. This is a fairly complex skill in French, and the Intermediate Level people appreciated the opportunity to practice it without fear of the red-inked corrections they obtained in grammar courses. I then encouraged Intermediate Level students to practice future narration and past description. For example, they could write paragraph-length letters in which one character informs another what will be the outcome of events mentioned in the reading. Or, they could write letters describing in past time one of the characters in the reading, and explaining why they liked or disliked that character.

At the same time, Advanced Level students practiced Superior Level skills by addressing a theme found in a work, by defending a hypothetical position or by supporting an opinion the work suggested. Moving up one level on the proficiency scale indeed challenged the stu-

dents, and I found that they needed more in-class time in which to write and obtain peer response group support. The students and I felt that the opportunity to practice the higher level skills was worth the time, however.

The three longer works necessitated a modified approach. They were discussed at the end of each quarter, at which point the students were so adept at listing out action that they suggested each student be assigned a chapter from which to make a list outside of class for the entire group. They wrote their lists on transparencies which they then brought to class for revision, after which they ran off photocopies for their classmates' journals. To assure that all students prepared the reading, I often began class with a short "who-what-when-where-why" quiz on the assignment before spending about twenty minutes reviewing student transparencies. By this time, students were so used to working together that they readily accepted each other's comments and correction in front of the entire class. Patterns of repeated error soon became something of a joke for the entire group. For example, Sophie could never remember the "de" that qualifies an indefinite noun after a negative verb. Her classmates began calling her "Pas de Sophie," and their teasing eventually led her to master this tricky concept.[5]

At the end of each term, I asked students to number the pages in their journals, and to create an annotated table of contents in which they gave each journal entry a title. This encouraged organization and review, which became very important when I asked each student to submit several topics for the final examination. In addition, I asked students to write a final self-assessment of their experience with this new approach. Their comments proved of great help in structuring subsequent courses.

Conclusions

Reflecting on this year-long experiment in integrating these concepts, I ask myself two questions: was it worth it, and will I continue to use this approach. Students' extensive use of written French, their improved performance on final examinations, their comments and reactions, as well as insights provided by recent language acquisition theory all lead to a resounding "yes."

This method expanded the extent of student writing in French. Many students wrote extensive journals, some as long as fifty pages each quarter. Final examinations improved, with a greater number of students writing short essay questions entirely in French. They also wrote with greater fluency and accuracy than in previous years. Although they did not address sophisticated concepts such as Voltaire's irony, their writing gave solid evidence of having read all the assigned readings with a good basic degree of comprehension.

In addition, student reaction to this

approach was positive. In response to a Writing across the Curriculum survey sheet devised by a colleague,[6] the vast majority of my students agreed that in-class free-writing and journal-keeping had helped them to improve their French language writing skills and had helped them write more clearly and carefully. Additional comments showed favorable reaction to the constant practice the course provided, to the opportunity to write without fear of correction, and to the clear basis for further inquiry the listing activities provided.

In summary, I think that 'writing to learn" procedures are successful because they appear to lower the affective filter students often bring to the learning situation.[7] These procedures reduce anxiety because they empower the student, they motivate because they seek to integrate learning with reality, and they spark self-confidence as students come to perceive the validity of their own insights through group interaction.

Most importantly, this approach works because it provides a communicative setting which affords ample opportunity for students to interact and practice all four language skills. In order to process each assignment, students read, then write at the beginning of class, speak, listen, and take notes during group work and class discussion, then conclude by writing reaction statements or journal entries. When proficiency guidelines are taken into consideration, the instructor can devise effective levels of comfort and challenge within this intensive communicative context. I look forward to using and perfecting this model in future courses.

Notes

[1]Several procedures enabled me to draw these conclusions. I became familiar with the speaking proficiency level of many students when they volunteered to be interviewed during an Oral Proficiency Interview Training workshop conducted in February 1991 by Chantal Thompson of ACTFL and Brigham Young University. I subsequently interviewed other students enrolled in the series during my first round of recorded interviews submitted for OPI certification. My ratings were then verified or corrected by my trainer. Although ACTFL has not yet released writing and reading proficiency tests, I was able to devise such instruments based on the ACTFL guidelines. My thanks to Dorothy James of Hunter College (CUNY) who shared her expertise in creating reading and writing proficiency tests with the Weber State Foreign Language faculty during a workshop on curriculum development held in June, 1989.

[2]A word about journals. Fulwiler suggests that students bring three-ring binder journals to class to serve as a log and clearinghouse of all procedures, as well as serve a number of purposes: to communicate with the instructor, to think to oneself, to solve problems, to summarize class discussion, to collect content on which to base examinations, and to process collaborative projects. He recom-

mends that the length and quality of the journal count heavily toward the course grade (fifty percent or more), and that the instructor collect journals two or three times a term with reactions to entries made using gray pencil rather than red ink. He emphasizes positive reinforcement of journal work: for instance, the instructor can put lively, clever, or gutsy journal entries on a heat sensitive overhead and share them with the entire class. (My own students loved this!) Significantly, Fulwiler recommends that the instructor keep a journal too. I found this very helpful because it provided a log of my experience and created a valuable reference for future courses.

[3]Again, my gratitude to Dorothy James of Hunter College (CUNY) for sharing her examples of German literature assignments devised for students on different proficiency levels enrolled in the same class.

[4]Lois Barry's manual *The Busy Prof's Travel Guide to Writing Across the Curriculum* provided excellent suggestions for structuring peer response groups (40-45). I modify her suggestions for structuring such groups according to the proficiency trisection of content, function, and accuracy. Working in groups of three, one student responds to another's content by answering such questions as 1) What do you like about what your classmate has written? 2) What questions does it raise in your mind? 3) What needs clarification? 4) Who is your classmate writing to? At the same time, a second peer answers questions concerning function and accuracy: 1) What language function does your classmate's writing accomplish? 2) Are there words or expressions that might better express his/her meaning? 3) Are there other ways your classmate might structure sentences or paragraphs in French? 4) Are basic mechanics of French grammar in place?

[5]Sarkodie-Mensah describes similar peer correction acceptance and reinforcement in the article "Writing In A Language You Do Not Know" (2-3).

[6]My thanks to my colleague Tony Spanos of the Weber State Foreign Language Department for devising this survey and sharing it with me.

[7]A number of researchers, including Stevick, Hyde, Gardner and Lambert, Dulay and Bert have contributed to the development of the "Affective Filter" hypothesis. See Krashen's discussion of "Applications of Psycholinguistic Research to the Classroom" included in the ACTFL publication *Applications of Research in Foreign Language Teaching* (54).

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